DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 604 CE 084 329

AUTHOR	Imel, Susan
TITLE	Adult Learning in Cohort Groups. Practice Application Brief No. 24.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ericacve.org/pubs.asp.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Ability; Academic Achievement; *Adult Development; *Adult Education; *Adult Learning; *Adult Students; Affective Measures; Cognitive Measurement; Cohort Analysis; Critical Thinking; Curriculum Design; Curriculum Development; Group Behavior; Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; Group Instruction; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Identification (Psychology); Knowledge Level; Learning Theories; Literature Reviews; Outcomes of Education; Peer Groups; Postsecondary Education; Program Effectiveness; Reference Groups; Student Attitudes; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship; *Transformative Learning
IDENTIFIERS	*Cohort Instructional Programs

ABSTRACT

A form of group learning, cohorts, has become increasingly attractive to administrators, instructors, and participants in adult education. Basic academic skills cohort learning supports three types of knowing: instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring; whereas, in higher and adult education cohort learning, the development of critical reflection and knowledge construction is the focus. Cohort learners report such positive effects as increased critical thinking skills, greater individual development, enhanced knowledge base, and learning motivation. Some research has revealed that not all cohorts work well, due to characteristics and behaviors of group members. Actual measurement of cohort learning outcomes has been inadequately studied. Educators can enhance the cohort experience by doing the following: (1) developing group relationships at the beginning; (2) balancing group and individual development; (3) providing an environment that both supports and challenges; and 4) acknowledging and addressing group and individual tensions. (Contains 12 references.) (AJ)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 472 604

Adult Learning in Cohort Groups
Practice Application Brief No. 24

Susan Imel

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

CE084329

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Educational Resources Information Center

PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 24

by Susan Imel
2002

Adult Learning in Cohort Groups

[According to a cohort participant,] cohorts are created not born. They are successful when everyone works collaboratively and collectively on improving their own and others' learning experiences. It takes self-responsibility, patience, courage, humor, commitment, sensitivity, and a lot of hard work to create such an enriching learning experience for everybody. (Nesbit 2001, p. 3)

Learning in groups has historical roots in adult education and many adult educators use group learning as an element of their programs (ibid.). Recently, a form of group learning—cohorts—has emerged as an attractive option for administrators, instructors, and participants alike (Fahy 2002). Cohorts are usually defined as groups of students who enroll at the same time and go through a program by taking the same courses at the same time, a process that is sometimes referred to as lock step (e.g., Chairs et al. 2002; Reynolds and Hebert 1998). A cohort is much more than a structure, however (Norris and Barnett 1994). It is "a tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group" (Drago-Severson et al. 2001, p. 15) that has foundations in group dynamics, adult development, and adult learning theory (ibid.; Nesbit 2001; Norris and Barnett 1994). This ***Brief*** highlights findings from research and theory on adult learning cohorts to examine how cohorts are structured or formed and the experience of the learning process within cohorts. Recommendations for practice are provided.

Forming and Structuring Cohorts

A cohort is more than an administrative arrangement. In fact, "to view the [cohort] structure merely as a method of course delivery, a vehicle for socialization, a convenient scheduling design, or as an upbeat, fashionable 'in' approach is to do cohort structure an injustice" (Norris and Barnett 1994, p. 34). Cohorts must be purposefully formed and structured if they are to succeed as environments that foster learning and development.

Both individual and group development are important aspects of cohorts (Chairs et al. 2002; Lawrence 1997; Norris and Barnett 1994). Cohort structure should support the personal development of its members within a collaborative, cohesive group environment. Research on cohorts (e.g., Brooks 1998; Chairs et al. 2002; Lawrence 1997; Maher 2001; Norris and Barnett 1994) reveals that successful cohorts balance the needs of the group with those of the individual members by fostering a sense of belonging, creating an environment in which mutual respect flourishes, supporting risk taking, providing a place for critical reflection and the development of shared understanding, and encouraging and sustaining multiple perspectives. Lawrence (1997), for example, says that the most successful cohort groups in her study valued diversity and that "many students broke out of their comfort zones of dealing with people who were similar to them" (p. 181).

If cohorts are to evolve into a cohesive group, initial experiences as a cohort are critical in group development. Some cohorts are initiated with residential experiences designed to allow students and instructors to get to know one another (e.g., Lawrence 1997; Tisdell et al. 2002). Tisdell et al. (ibid.) describe how a residential experience made up of structured and informal activities with a focus on community building and co-learning was critical to the success of an online master's cohort. The participants in a study conducted by Norris and Barnett (1994) kept daily journals during a summer intensive course experience in which they were asked to reflect on how they were benefitting as individuals from the cohort experience as well as how the group was changing and developing. The participants in Maher's study (2001) had several intensive residential experiences over a 10-month period that enabled the cohort to evolve. At the end of the initial 3-week experience, for example, the "cohesion developed between cohort members...appeared to be somewhat tenuous" (p. 16), but by the end of the fall period, members had developed a level of comfort with each other that enabled shared understanding to blossom.

A theory about the structure of cohort groups emerged from research by Kegan et al. (2001). As a way of defining the functions of cohorts, researchers used Kegan's theory of adult development that considers a person as a maker of meaning throughout his or her lifespan. According to Kegan's theory, "growth processes, such as learning and teaching processes, depend on connections and these processes...invariably occur in some context" (Drago-Severson et al. 2001, p. 15). Cohorts—termed "holding environments"—can provide a context for the growth processes of teaching and learning and contribute the support and challenge needed for growth and development. These holding environments have three characteristics or functions (adapted from Drago-Severson et al., p. 16):

1. They must "hold well" by accepting and confirming who the individual is without expectations for change.

2. When individuals are ready, the cohort must "let go" by challenging learners and allowing them to develop beyond their existing ways of knowing.

3. They must "stick around" to provide continuity, stability, and availability to the individual undergoing growth and development.

A cohort structure does not ensure that a cohort will succeed (Norris and Barnett 1994). Cohorts must be structured as environments in which individuals experience growth and development supported and challenged by the group.

Learning in Cohorts

The form and structure of cohorts is critical to the success of the learning process, and research reveals that cohorts vary in structure and support different types of learning. The learners in the cohorts studied by Kegan et al. (2001) were engaged in the development of basic academic skills. These cohorts supported three types of knowing: *instrumental* in which learners focus on finding the correct answers, *socializing* in which learners have positive internal characteristics about learning but rely on the teacher for the correct answer, and *self-authoring* in which learners create and explain their own knowledge and are comfortable with ambiguity. In higher and adult education, the development of critical reflection and knowledge construction is the focus of many cohorts (e.g., Lawrence 1997; Nesbit 2001; Norris and Barnett 1994; Tisdell et al. 2002). In these cohorts, students are encouraged to challenge assumptions and engage in joint knowledge construction with each other and the instructor (Nesbit 2001), and transformative learning frequently occurs (Lawrence 1997; Tisdell et al. 2002).

Research on learning in cohorts reveals that cohort members tend to have positive feelings about their experiences. Learners report such benefits as increased development of critical thinking skills (Chairs et al. 2002); greater individual development as a cohort member (ibid.); development of an enhanced knowledge base (Norris and Barnett 1994); opportunity to examine one's own knowledge (Tisdell et al. 2002); motivation to learn more (Brooks 1998); and changes in perspectives on their own and others' learning (Lawrence 1997). A common theme throughout all participant comments was the value placed on the opportunity to be a part of a collaborative group.

Whether learning in cohorts increases learning outcomes has received scant attention in the literature. Two studies (Reynolds and Hebert 1998; Reynolds and Sitharaman 2000) that used a survey to compare students from cohort and noncohort groups found significant learning gains in the affective domain related to attitudes, self-concepts, and values. Significant learning gains in the cognitive domain were not found, however. Positive outcomes in the affective domain are consistent with the results from other studies (e.g., Brooks 1998; Chairs et al. 2002) indicating that cohort members liked being part of a collaborative group and found it to be an enriching learning experience.

Although learners generally report positive experiences in cohorts, some researchers (e.g., Lawrence 1997; Maher 2001; Norris and Barnett 1994) discovered that certain factors or characteristics and behaviors of group members can limit the effectiveness of cohorts. These factors include passive or dominant group members, changes in group membership, lack of commitment to the cohort, failure to meet group expectations, members viewing the instructor as the ultimate authority, and independent learning styles that cannot adapt to group environments.

Recommendations for Practice

- **Spend time at the beginning of the cohort developing group relationships.** The success of the cohort depends on the ability of its members to form a cohesive, collaborative group. Time spent at the beginning laying the foundation for the group will pay dividends over the life of the cohort. Initial activities need to focus on building collegial and interpersonal relations as well as model expectations for how the cohort will function.

- **Balance group and individual development.** Related to the development of group relationships is the need to balance group and individual development. Successful cohorts feature an interdependence that fosters both individual and group development (Norris and Barnett 1994). Attention to group process and fostering cohesive groups should be balanced with the needs of the individual learners within the cohort.

- **Provide an environment that both supports and challenges.** Cohort members need to feel secure but they also need to be challenged if they are to engage in critical reflection and knowledge construction. As in any adult learning situation, instructors have to balance the need to ensure that learners are "held well" (experience high support) but also "let go" (experience high challenge) (Kegan et al. 2001).

- **Acknowledge and address tensions that may arise between learners and between learners and instructors.** Members of cohorts will likely experience pressures as a normal part of the group development process. As they engage in collaborative learning, different tensions might arise related to knowledge construction. Working out the sharing of power within the group and developing interdependent roles for instructors and learners can also result in tension. Instructors can ease the way by preparing cohort members for the possibility of these tensions; they must also strike a balance between letting the group settle its issues and stepping in to mediate. (Lawrence 1997; Norris and Barnett 1994)

With their foundation in group development and adult learning theory, cohorts are a natural fit in adult education. Research on cohorts in adult education settings reveals that many are sites where learners engage in critical reflection and co-creation of knowledge and experience transformative learning, considered by many to be hallmarks of adult learning.

References

Brooks, P. A. "Cohort Communities in Higher Education: The Best Example of Adult Education." In *39th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, San Antonio, Texas, May 15-16, 1998*, compiled by J. C. Kimmel. San Antonio, TX: University of the Incarnate Word; College Station: Texas A and M University, 1998. (ED 426 247) http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/1998/98brooks.htm

Chairs, M. J.; McDonald, B. J.; Shroyer, P.; Urbanski, B.; and Vertin, D. "Meeting the Graduate Education Needs of Minnesota Extension Educators." *Journal of Extension* 40, no. 4 (August 2002): online, n.p. http://www.joe.org/joe/2002august/rb4.shtml

Drago-Severson, E.; Helsing, D.; Kegan, R.; Popp, N.; Broderick, M.; and Portnow, K. "The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups." *Focus on Basics* 5, Issue B (October 2001): 15-22. http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/2001/fob_5ib.pdf

Fahy, P. J. "Book Review—Cohort Programming and Learning." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 2, no. 2 (January 2002): online, n.p. http://www.irrodl.org/content/v2.2/fahy-review.pdf

Kegan, R.; Broderick, M.; Drago-Severson, E.; Helsing, D.; Popp, N.; and Portnow, K. *Toward a New Pluralism in ABE/ESOL Classrooms: Teaching to Multiple "Cultures of Mind."* Boston, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, August 2001. (ED 465 014) http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/reports.htm

Lawrence, R. L. "The Interconnecting Web: Adult Learning Cohorts as Sites for Collaborative Learning, Feminist Pedagogy and Experiential Ways of Knowing." In *38th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, Stillwater, Oklahoma, May 16-18, 1997*, compiled by R. E. Nolan and H. Chelesvig, pp. 179-184. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University, 1997. (ED 409 460) http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/1997/97Lawrence.html

Maher, M. A. "Professional Living Situations: Cohorts as Communities of Living and Learning." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA, April 2001. (ED 451 796)

Nesbit, T. "Extending the Boundaries: Graduate Education for Nontraditional Learners." *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 2-10.

Norris, C. J., and Barnett, B. "Cultivating a New Leadership Paradigm: From Cohorts to Communities." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council of Educational Administration, Philadelphia, PA, October 1994. (ED 387 877)

Reynolds, K., and Hebert, F. T. "Learning Achievements of Students in Cohort Groups." *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 46, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 34-42.

Reynolds, K. C., and Sitharaman, S. "Business Education in Cohorts: Does Familiarity Breed Learning?" *Journal of Business and Training Education* 9 (Fall 2000): 29-44. (ED 461 738)

Tisdell, E. J. et al. "High Tech Meets High Touch: Cohort Learning Online in Graduate Higher Education." In *Proceedings of the 21st Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing and Community Education, DeKalb, Illinois, October 9-11, 2002*, edited by R. A. Orem, pp. 114-119. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 2002. http://www.cedu.niu.edu/reps/Document/Midwest_Conference_Papers_part2.pdf

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Practice Application Briefs may be freely reproduced and are available at http://ericacve.org/pab.asp.

Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
X	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").